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Adult education on L.A. Unified's chopping block

With financial woes in Sacramento and new freedom on spending earmarked funds, the district proposes a budget that has no money to help adults get high school diplomas, learn English or acquire career skills.

Sandy Banks

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Adult education teacher Planaria Price is used to the ups and downs of budget planning in the giant Los Angeles Unified School District.

Price remembers boom times in the late 1980s, when classes at Evans Community Adult School near downtown ran 24 hours a day. Money was flowing and immigrants flocked to English lessons, hoping for legalization under federal amnesty programs.

And Price has stuck it out through tough downturns, when classes were cut, teachers were laid off and many vocational programs closed.

Still, nothing in her 39 years as a teacher at Evans prepared her for the news that the district's entire adult education division may be on the chopping block.

"The program's already been cut in half," she said. "Now we find out that we are being 'zeroed out' of the budget."

Indeed, according to a proposal presented to the school board last month, there is no money budgeted for the \$120-million Division of Adult and Career Education in 2012-2013.

But the district budget is a moving target. The spending plan goes to the school board for public review in February. Then it faces a months-long evolution as state financing numbers shift.

Down the line, that "zero" might turn out to be an accounting gimmick or a political ploy. But for now, it has stoked the fears of adult students and their teachers and spotlighted how vulnerable they are.

"We've had dramatic cuts over the years," said Julie Wetzel, a teacher-advisor with a program that helps disabled adults learn life skills.

"This feels like we're being forced out because they don't think what we're doing is important."

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Supt. John Deasy disagreed that adult education's value is reflected in his budget line. Thirty adult schools offer 350,000 students a chance to earn high school diplomas or learn English and career skills.

The program may be "zeroed out," but it isn't being singled out, he said. "There are so many things that are going to be zeroed out of the budget, this is just the tip of the iceberg."

Deasy ticked off a list of likely cuts: preschool programs, elementary art, summer school and thousands of administrators, teachers, nurses, custodians, gardeners and cafeteria workers.

"We're talking about \$540 million worth of reductions," he said. "Every single one is important, and none of them should have to be made."

Adult education is an easy target because of forces coalescing in Sacramento: The institutional penny-pinching required by the state's ongoing budget problems and legislative changes that have given local school systems more spending autonomy.

Three years ago, state legislators untied dozens of education programs from their earmarked funding pools. That allowed districts to decide how to spend money that had had been designated for specific services, such as counseling, libraries or summer school.

The biggest pot of newly flexible money was in adult education.

"Some districts just wiped out adult ed and took the money," said Ed Morris, Los Angeles Unified's director of the Division of Adult and Career Education.

"Many never liked adult ed anyway," he said. "They look at the situation like this as 'Let's not waste a crisis.'"

Los Angeles didn't raid its program. Still, state funding cuts trimmed the budget by 20% and the district — wary of looming reductions — chose to lop off an additional 10%. "We had to economize," Morris said.

Now they have to prioritize. That means deciding what matters more: the aspirations of hardworking adults trying to learn their way to self-sufficiency or the needs of children trying to learn to read and calculate and write.

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This sort of resource-balancing act is going on across the country, in schools reshaped by such disparate forces as immigration and technology.

Morris hears the clash of competing needs in private meetings and public forums: "They say we need teachers, not administrators. We need computers, but not books. We need K-through-12, but we don't need adult education."

Some districts, including Oakland, have already gutted their adult education programs. What officials will do in Los Angeles, Morris said, "is anybody's guess."

A teacher I interviewed in the lunch room at Evans put it more bluntly.

"People are worried because they know what happens when all that money goes to [district headquarters]. It goes to the fat cats and the consultants, and the schools continue to suffer." He didn't want me to use his name because he doesn't want a bull's-eye on his back when layoffs come along.

Morris doesn't expect all adult schools to shut down, because ESL, diploma and vocational programs draw, in part, on targeted federal funds.

But in a cash-strapped district forced to cut basics at children's schools, it's hard to argue the importance of teaching a grown man to upholster a chair or helping an elderly immigrant learn enough English to pass her citizenship exam.

Adult education might seem like an unaffordable frill. But it's hard to square that perception with what I heard from grateful students last week in Price's ESL class.

I spoke with an ambitious young woman from Cameroon; a Catholic monk from Colombia; and a college graduate from Mexico — she's a mother of two daughters who spends six hours a day studying English so she can understand their homework. "If you are a parent," she said, "and can't communicate with your children, there will be a big mess in the family."

And I still recall a [graduation I attended 10 years ago in Watts](#), where the stage was crowded with beaming parents who had been nudged back to class for high school diplomas by children rooting for their success.

This is not just about English lessons.

The debate, as it rolls along, may be waylaid by politics, hijacked by immigration rants or bogged down in battles over funding streams. "It's just another money game" to the bureaucrats, one teacher said. "Nobody knows how much time they put in, how hard they work, what our students are willing to do."

Adult school students don't have many defenders in high places. But their efforts to make up for what they missed sends a message that young students need.

Price expressed it best:

"The children of my students are wonderful students. That may have to do with them seeing that their parents care so much about education. What kind of bleak future are we leaving to them without the role models of adults who are striving to do better in their lives?"

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